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ABSTRACT

A principal can provide support for beginning teachers by gaining specific knowledge of each teacher's curriculum, by developing rapport, and by encouraging teachers in seven key areas. Rapport is built with friendly, solicitous behavior and a lot of listening; it can be destroyed by too much criticism, insensitivity, and aloofness. A principal must model rapport-building behaviors, which include both verbal and nonverbal emotional cues. The seven touchstones for beginning teachers include knowing and accepting self, building self-confidence, developing positive attitudes, planning, involving students, identifying students' levels, and knowing colleagues. Support is the critical factor that a principal must supply for a successful school year. (FWR)

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STREAMLINED SEMINAR

Volume 2, Number 6 August 1984

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How to Help Beginning Teachers

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How to Help Beginning Teachers

Robert J. Krajewski and Norman L. McCumsey

It is August. Like elementary and middle school principals everywhere, you are at your desk, ready to make your new year's resolutions.

Although such vows are traditionally taken by the rest of the world on January 1, August is your month for planning new strategies and setting new goals for your school.

First on your agenda is a run-through of your staff list. Looking at the roster, you settle on one name, Carole Wilson, the newest and youngest member of your staff for the coming school year.

Thinking back, you recall the day you interviewed Carole for the third-grade teaching job she now holds. Fresh out of college, bright and eager to set the teaching world afire, she promised to be an intelligent, loving, and dedicated teacher.

But that was back in April, before Carole was ready to assume responsibility for providing a first-rate education for 25 enthusiastic, energetic, yet sometimes noisy and unruly third graders.

Of course, Carole will still be eager to do her job well, but the reality of life as a teacher has surely become more clear to her. She is likely to be consumed with doubt as well as with optimism; she may be reasonably confident of her ability to teach her children how to read, write, and compute, but worried about how she will communicate with their parents, how she will fit in with the other teachers at the school, or how she will get along with you.

Put yourself in her position (as well you may have been one day in the past). As a beginning teacher, Carole will have to cope with a whole gamut of emotions common to everyone starting out in a new job. Add to those feelings the trepidation that comes with, say, moving to a new area or the prospect of one day being evaluated by the "boss," and the result may turn Carole into a quivering mass of professional insecurities.

What, then, can you do to help Carole make the transition from tyro to expert? As first on your list of new year's resolutions for 1984-85, you may want to consider ways to work more successfully with the Carole Wilsons on your staff, those teachers who are new to your school and perhaps new to the profession.

It may help if you actually articulate that new year's resolution to yourself: *My goals for the coming academic year will be to have new teachers feel at ease and comfortable with their choice of profession; to have them become well prepared for a demanding job; and to know that they are supported by those around them in positions of authority.*

Easy to say, you are undoubtedly thinking, but not so easy to do. Granted, you may not be able to cure all their pains; homesickness, for one, will probably be beyond your reach. But it *is* possible to reduce some of the anxieties faced by beginning teachers and thereby make them

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more effective in their new profession.

What is required is a careful examination of the ways in which you interact with them, a hard look at the kinds of "messages" you send on a daily basis. For that matter, there doubtless are many aspects of life in your school that can be improved by careful analysis, by being put under an intellectual microscope for critical dissection.

In some cases, suggestions for improvement that result from close scrutiny may seem self-evident or even painfully obvious. Nevertheless, the examination process is worth undertaking, if only for the renewed vigor with which you will approach the tasks you have studied.

Ways you can help beginning teachers are no exception: the payoffs will be great both for you and for the teachers you are guiding, if you think critically about the techniques and strategies involved and how they can best be applied.

Instructional improvement

An important first question to ask yourself is what you want to accomplish in your dealings with staff. One answer, of course, will certainly be that you want to promote high-quality instruction in your school.

Thus, if you are to be an effective guide for your teachers, you should have both knowledge of instructional theory and skill in its practical applications. It will also help if you are familiar with the specifics of the curriculum for each grade level in your school. Do second graders learn multiplication with two-digit numbers? Are fifth graders supposed to have a working knowledge of the American system of government?

That is the first step, then, to take in putting your new teachers at ease: know their material.

Nurturing rapport

All right, you say, before I go into their classrooms I will know just what it is that my new teachers are required to teach. But surely there are other things I can do to put them at ease.

Rapport is fundamental to success in all your professional relationships, be they with new teachers or with more experienced members of your staff.

Absolutely correct. This is where *rapport* comes in, a concept that is fundamental to success in *all* your professional relationships, be they with new teachers or with older, more experienced members of your staff, parents, or school board members.

By definition, rapport is a harmonious relationship, especially one of mutual trust. If you are to have rapport with your colleagues, you must nourish and cultivate harmonious relationships with them. The responsibility for this harmony resides not with them but with you, their principal.

Rapport does not just happen; it takes diligent, dedicated work and will require *all* your human relations skills. The way you develop rapport with others is through continual, conscious effort.

One way to begin is to maintain daily contacts with new teachers. The form these contacts take is vital to the professional well-being of members of your staff. Such contacts can either promote rapport or injure it.

Contacts you might have

As an elementary or middle school principal, you can build rapport in many ways: by following an "open-door" policy; by greeting teachers warmly; by being available for help in the classroom; by recognizing, in a positive manner, students in their classes; by praising teachers' work and allowing them to have a say in decision making; by providing help with "problem" children; by supplying needed resource materials and equipment; by keeping teachers informed about district-level policies; by taking a personal (but not prying) interest in their lives; by talking to them about outside interests; and above all, by *listening* to them.

Of course, there are contacts that principals can have with teachers that injure rapport: showing lack of support in discipline matters; not offering sufficient help with "problem" parents; showing favoritism toward staff members; making negative comments about a teacher's method of organization; being aloof; being unusually critical, especially in front of others; being tactless and unsympathetic toward problems, both personal and school-related; not acknowledging good work; issuing notes in place of personal contact; or just not listening to the things that the teachers are saying.

Although you may find the idea a bit embarrassing, remember that you serve as a model from whom your teachers take their cues. If you clearly value instructional improvement, the chances are that your teachers will too. If teachers sense that you trust them, they will probably be more inclined to trust their students. *All* principal-teacher contacts are impor-

tant; you must ensure that these contacts are positive.

As an exercise for your own professional growth, you might want to list the types of contacts you presently have with teachers. From that list, choose ten that you feel promote rapport. Each day, make a conscious effort to cultivate, strengthen, and expand those rapport-building interactions with others.

Also from the original list, note ten types of contact you think are the opposite—those that, although it may be painful to admit, have worked against you in your efforts to develop good relationships with your staff. Do your very best to construct a way in which each of these not-so-helpful contacts could be improved; better yet, do your level best to get rid of these negative behaviors.

Cues

In communicating with others, both verbal and nonverbal cues are important. Clearly, you will want to use words and phrases that reflect sincerity when you praise and encourage teachers. "Please share that," "appreciated," "wish I'd thought of that," "I agree," "super," "bless you," "I can tell that you like what you're doing," and "you're a true professional" are obvious examples that might work for you. Remember, though, to vary the terms you use, because those repeated continually tend to wear out.

Also be aware of your own feelings when you communicate with teachers. If you feel enthusiastic about a project, try to express that enthusiasm when talking to your staff. Others often anticipate your emotions, and although you may not have intended it, they may feel that you are only "going through the routine" so that you can move on to your next project. Like it or not, what teachers perceive to be your message may prove to be just as important as the message itself. By the very nature of your approach to your staff members, you can either turn them on or turn them off.

Even for the veterans on your staff, opening day might be an unsettling experience.

Facial expression and gestures are also means of communication. Although there are no magic techniques for ensuring that your words will be interpreted in the way you intended them to be, there are some simulation exercises that might be useful:

- Read a selection of names from a telephone directory as if you are bored . . . in a hurry . . . unhappy . . . enthusiastic . . . exasperated . . . trying to keep a secret . . . and so on. You can either perform this exercise with a colleague or by speaking into a tape recorder. The key is to get feedback so that you learn how your messages are coming across.
- With a colleague, practice shaking hands with the same feelings listed above.
- In a group, practice making facial expressions to convey those feelings.

The first day of school

Carole Wilson, that new teacher on your staff, will surely need some direction and support before the first day of school. Even for the veterans on your staff, opening day might be an unsettling experience. You can help beginning teachers approach their jobs with much greater assurance—and far less anxiety—if you plan ways to help them adjust to those challenging first few days. Following are seven "touchstones for beginning teachers" you might want to consider when guiding your new staff members.

1. *Knowing and accepting self.* Socrates was right. "Know thyself" is acknowledged by modern psychologists and psychiatrists as being basic to human growth, as it was in an earlier time by philosophers, theologians, and others concerned with the human condition. Until teachers learn to understand and accept themselves, it may be difficult for them to accept and understand others; thus, it will be practically impossible for them to teach with a sense of confidence and security.

Getting to know and understand one's self is a lifelong commitment, but taking a first step toward this self-examination can be accomplished in many ways. We all have strong and weak points, although recognizing them in ourselves is not always easy, especially the latter. People involved in "sensitivity sessions" or encounter groups typically are shocked when they discover that the image they project differs significantly from the image they thought they projected.

Before school starts, then, you might want to ask Carole Wilson and other beginning teachers to prepare an inventory of their strong and weak points. Helping them learn to see themselves as others do may not be easy, but that goal is fundamental to

constructive daily interactions with students.

In fact, many schools of education use self-rating sheets to judge student teachers' performance. Your new teachers may find that, having filled out such a form before school starts and continuing to do so periodically throughout the year, they have been helped to see themselves in a more realistic light.

If the self-rating system works, beginning teachers will be helped to accept themselves both as teachers and as individuals. The exercise may also help them learn to accept their students, whatever their varying mental and physical capacities, likes and dislikes, needs and desires, and so on. The self-rating system may be just the thing your teachers need to build on their strengths, shore up their weaknesses, and improve their teaching performance.

2. *Building self-confidence.* The complementary qualities of self-knowledge and self-confidence can be considered prerequisites for successful teaching. But students—especially those who may be rambunctious, active, or noisy—can pose a psychological threat to new teachers. Moreover, anxiety-ridden teachers are more likely to deal harshly and ineffectively with students they perceive as threatening.

As principal, you can help beginning teachers simply by getting them to keep in mind that they are older, more experienced, and better trained in their subject areas than the students—and thus have reason to be tolerant of them. You can encourage those beginning teachers who feel threatened when faced with unruly or unresponsive students not to descend to the children's level by lashing out at them, but rather to work diligently at retaining composure by reacting in a calm, rational manner. The end result will be improved classroom behavior for everyone—students and teachers alike.

3. *Developing positive attitudes.* Students form early, almost immediate impressions about the attitudes of their teachers. Just as your outlook affects the morale of your staff, teachers who have enthusiastic, bright, and positive attitudes will instill that spirit in their students. Clearly, positive attitudes are vital to both teaching and learning.

Self-knowledge and self-confidence can be considered prerequisites for successful teaching.

You may need to remind your teachers that attitudes can be conveyed nonverbally: through posture, clothing and decorum, movement, and facial expression. Attitude is also reflected by the physical atmosphere of the classroom: plants, pictures, and eye-catching bulletin boards convey a bright and cheerful classroom and bring a special sparkle to the instruction that takes place there. Personal touches provided by students and variations in seating arrangements can help students add their own perspectives to the room.

Remember that student attitudes in class are likely to mirror the teacher's attitude both toward the students and toward learning in general. As principal, you will want to ensure that no student is subjected to teacher attitudes that project negativism, nonacceptance, or lack of enthusiasm.

4. *Planning.* It goes without saying that beginning teachers should give a good deal of forethought to the mechanics of running a class, especially in the first few days of school.

You can help new teachers to plan, organize, and structure their lessons. Such help might be as simple as asking the teacher to give a name to the lesson being taught, as a way of ensuring that there is a focus to the time spent on the task. (However, you might want to remind teachers—and especially new ones—not to be afraid to deviate from the plans they have outlined. Flexibility is an essential ingredient in successful teaching; lesson plans can and should be altered to accommodate special interests or activities proposed by students.)

One technique that beginning teachers might find useful in planning appealing lessons for the youngsters in their classes is an interest inventory. Such a tool poses specific questions to the students: it asks what the students like to do when not in school; what television shows they watch most often; what movies they have enjoyed; what hobbies they pursue; and what special abilities or talents they have.

Activities planned for the first few days that capitalize on students' outside interests will establish the tone for the whole year. New teachers might find the inventory to be a handy way to demonstrate their interest in the class and in the students' needs and abilities.

Teachers who have planned well, whose presentations are understandable and clear, and who employ enough variety in instruction to keep students' interest levels high, will in general be the teachers whom the students most respect. And both students and teachers will have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment at the conclusion of a successful lesson.

5. *Involving students.* Students prosper, both intellectually and emotionally, when they are encouraged to assume as much responsibility as possible within the constraints of life in school.

You can help beginning teachers develop trust in their students and respect for young people's judgment by encouraging them to involve students when establishing classroom rules. However, you may need to remind new teachers that strict and firm order does not necessarily have to be present in the classroom at all times. "Productive turbulence" and "orderly disorder" are appropriate, as long as the teacher is able to return students to order quickly when order is needed. In fact, some "disorder" and noise are required for certain types of constructive activities.

Moreover, young children are unable to sit for long periods of time and should not be required to do so. Physical activity in the classroom revitalizes students and actually helps them adhere to standards of good discipline.

Often new teachers make the mistake of thinking that they have to establish themselves as "tough" disciplinarians from the start. As an adviser to beginning teachers, you might want to discourage them from doing so. Domineering or dominating behavior as a standard method of operation generally does not work, although new teachers may also need to be reminded not to abdicate their responsibilities for maintaining decorum. Students ought to be encouraged to contribute and share ideas, work and learn together, and become involved in discussions. Such involvement leads to healthy informality in the learning atmosphere, creates a pleasant environment in which the students can learn together, and helps produce responsible citizens.

6. *Identifying the students' level.* Becoming familiar with students' interests and their academic abilities is a top priority for any teacher who wants to plan and prepare for a successful teaching year. Following are four basic methods for getting to know students, their present achievements, and the rates at which they can be expected to learn:

Domineering or dominating behavior as a standard method of operation generally does not work.

☐ Teachers can review each student's academic record with an open mind, using scholastic progress and anecdotal data as background information to create general impressions. Teachers who work this way tend not to "label" any student and to reserve judgment until they have seen actual behavioral and achievement results.

☐ Teachers can review test results for student achievement levels (or potentials for achievement) in various academic subjects. These test results may be from standardized tests that the youngsters have taken in the past, or they may be results of teacher-made tests.

☐ Teachers may want to develop their own tools for determining student ability levels at the beginning of the year. For example, teacher-developed word lists and graded oral and silent reading exercises, followed by direct and inferential questioning, are excellent methods for obtaining individual students' basic reading levels. Since beginning teachers may lack the know-how, principals should be ready to guide them or have them work with other, more experienced teachers who can help develop diagnostic tools and show how to use the results constructively.

☐ Teacher-student interaction as a method for identifying students' achievement levels requires that teachers meet with students individually. By allowing students to answer specific questions about their likes and dislikes, skills, and special interests, teachers can learn a good deal about these young people's achievement levels while at the same time developing a personal relationship with them.

You may want to suggest to your new teachers that they use one or all of the above methods for identifying students' capacities and interest. In addition, it may be important for you to give your staff members this gentle reminder: accept each student at his or her own level of ability or achievement.

Now your teachers are ready to plan lessons, develop materials, and design projects that will incorporate all levels of learning within the classroom. Some students may require enrichment above and beyond the planned lesson; others may need to have materials watered down or have extra projects added that incorporate their special talents and skills. By knowing and understanding each student in the classroom, and planning accordingly, beginning teachers can be satisfied that the daily lessons provide room for each student's needs and abilities, and that therefore all members of the class are offered meaningful learning experiences.

7. *Knowing one's colleagues.* Although good interpersonal relationships are critical to job success for

many professionals, teachers who are just starting out have particular needs that can be met only by developing solid relationships with their colleagues. Experienced teachers—especially those who enjoy their work—typically are happy to offer advice and counsel to newer members of the staff. "Old pros" can give answers to thorny questions, tips on classroom management, or—perhaps most important—just a strong shoulder to lean on or a sympathetic ear for those who need it.

In fact, because on-the-job relationships are so important to the professional satisfactions of your staff, you might consider ways to promote these relationships even before the school year begins. For Carole Wilson and other new teachers who have accepted positions at your school, you might think about assigning more experienced teachers as "counselor/colleagues" to the new teachers for the year. These colleagues may become mentors for the new staff members, but even if the experienced teachers do nothing more than listen to tales of frustration and anxiety from the new teachers, they will have served a truly important purpose.

Do not forget that you, too, are a colleague of your new teachers. As principal, you must pay more attention to the Carole Wilsons on your staff than you do to those who have been with you before, if only to ensure that new members know board policies, courses of study, varied logistical/procedural matters, and the ins and outs of the way your building operates. And, of course, you will want to encourage questions from new teachers and do your level best to be empathetic to the uncertainties they are surely feeling at starting out.

Support: The critical factor

There are many, many things you can do to help prepare beginning teachers for the jobs that await them. The key consideration to remember is that although you may need to help your new staff members in a number of areas, the most important thing you can do is to give them support at every turn. That support is essential, even fundamental, to *their* success, to your success, and to the success of students in your school.

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